

STATEMENT FROM CLERGY FOLLOWING VISIT TO RIKERS ISLAND

New York--Trinity Church Wall Street Priest-in-Charge Rev. Phillip A. Jackson and Episcopal Charities Executive Director Rev. Kevin VanHook issued the following statement after visiting Rikers Island on October 27, 2021:

“Rikers Island is a place of suffering. The appalling conditions we witnessed this week reflect not just how the effects of racism and callous indifference can destroy lives – particularly of those who are Black and Brown, poor, homeless, or mentally ill – but a system that is brutal, unhealthy, and deeply troubled for everyone – our neighbors who are detained there, staff, and service providers who work there.

During our visit, we saw the spectrum of suffering. We met people who had been incarcerated for over a year just waiting for trial. We saw those suffering from mental illness, a condition that afflicts nearly half of those being held on Rikers. We saw the effects of severe staff shortages, both on those who were working and on the lack of services that are provided for detainees. We saw decrepit physical conditions, including floors cracking under our feet.

Rikers is fundamentally and irreparably broken for all involved. We urge the city and the next Mayor to accelerate the timeline so this jail complex is closed as quickly as possible. And our criminal legal system must be transformed into one that is rooted in justice, redemption, respect, and love.

In the meantime, we must safely and dramatically decarcerate our city’s jails. Our government leaders have tools they can use now to ensure anyone detained is treated humanely and released at the earliest opportunity. This means utilizing pre-trial and supervised release, work release programs, and alternatives to incarceration. Additionally, no one should be in jail simply because they cannot afford bail. We call on DAs to stop requesting excessive money bail, and for judges to always take a person’s “ability to pay” into account.

Longer-term, we must move away from criminal-legal responses for societal ills and toward real investments that build thriving communities. That includes expanded access to health and mental health care, affordable and supportive housing, quality education, and restorative justice programs, so we can finally end a reliance on incarceration that for decades has destroyed our families and neighborhoods.

We believe that all human beings are God's beloved children and worthy of dignity. The conditions at Rikers treat no one with dignity. We left Rikers with a deep sense of responsibility to call once again for change, and with sympathy for everyone involved in what is a place of trauma and exhaustion. We call on all our government leaders to take immediate, bold, and moral action that charts a better future for all our fellow New Yorkers."